

The Problem with “The West”

Ahminah Hack¹

Every time I turn around, there’s someone harping on about the evils of the West. Not to mention how we need to begin working past our issues with it, to move towards a harmonious future. I open all forms of newsprint, I read:

“When one examines the West’s fear of Islam, and tries to relate it to the reasons usually given ...”

“Islam and the West from a Muslim perspective.”

“Two historical adversaries, the West and Islam ...”

“The Future of Islam and the West – Clash of Civilizations or Peaceful Co-existence?”

I go to the mosque, I’m told:

“... the confrontation between the West and Islam is getting worse”

“The West is waging war on Islam!”

I sit with colleagues, I hear:

“When will we begin to move away from hostile relations between Islam and the West, and towards dialogue?”

¹Aver, December 2006, pp. 12-13. Hack is a Social Worker. She received her MSW at York University and a B.A. (Sociology)/B.S.W. with a minor in Religious Studies from McMaster University, all in Ontario, Canada.

So, when you talk about this evil adversary, it must be me. If Muslims are the enemy, it's me, I'm Muslim. If Westerners are the enemy, it's me. I'm from "the West". But when I say that, I get:

"Where are you from?"

"I'm Canadian."

"But where are you really from?"

"Umm, I was born at St. Mike's in Toronto where my family lived in Scarborough, Ontario but I was raised in Mississauga, Ontario...?"

"Don't be difficult. Where is your family from? You know that's what I really meant."

"Uhh, no I didn't. My parents came from Guyana, but that's still in the West."

"Not Ghana? Are there even Muslims in Guyana? Come on, where were your ancestors from?"

"You mean, 250 years ago? Okay, India. And before you ask, yes, I do know from specifically where, but no I'm not going to tell you."

"Ohhh, so don't worry. You're not really Western because THAT'S where you're really from!"

"What?! So let me guess. That means, when you talk about the wayward West, you're not talking about me. Face it, I caught onto your semantics, and that excuse isn't going to fly."

Pitching Islam against some vague notion of 'the West' has been contrived to divide our ummah's strength. And to my horror, it has been willingly adopted by people in what I thought was my own community. My very own self-proclaimed brothers and sisters in Islam. But if you say that Islam inherently opposes the West, are you implying that someone who's 1) born and raised in the West and 2) of Western heritage, is a second class Muslim? Then you really don't think of me as your sister.

Let's take it one step further. How about you? Aren't you here, in the West, right now? Welcome to second class I guess.

Come on. Was Islam not a message that came to all people? Were Messengers of the faith not sent to all corners of the world? Or does that only translate to the Arab peninsula, South Asia, and maybe some of North Africa? Give me a break.

Stop judging how religious a person may potentially be based on where they're from, or who their family may be. Splitting Islam and the West like they are two contrasting things, does just that. So stop doing it, even if you're doing it unconsciously.

Choose your words carefully. Work on your terminology, and know that using words without thoroughly thinking about it can be offensive, and downright racist. Yes. Racist.

Realize that Islam has spread to all corners of the earth, by the Grace and Mercy of God, and that no Muslim is superior to another save for in respect to their iman. And that only God can judge that.

Recognize the struggle that we are all working through, is it against a location, or an ideology? Perhaps, instead of saying “the West,” we should begin using more far-reaching terms, such as “secular” and “popular culture.”

Think about it.

Aminah Hack is a Social Worker, focusing on issues of Woman Abuse from a critical anti-oppressive framework. She completed her MSW at York University, and has a B.A. (Sociology)/B.S.W. with a minor in Religious Studies from McMaster University.